

By Jess Bravin for [The Wall Street Journal](#)

The Justice Department, stepping up its oversight of the juvenile justice system, has launched an investigation into whether school and law enforcement officials are targeting black students in Meridian, Miss., for unfair treatment.

The Civil Rights Division chief, Assistant Attorney General Tom Perez, disclosed the investigation in letters to local officials earlier this month. The department is investigating whether city and county authorities have a “pattern or practice” of violating the youths’ constitutional rights, specifically the 14th Amendment’s guarantees of due process and equal protection of the law, and the Fourth Amendment ban on unreasonable searches and seizures.

Department officials said the allegations involve a “very tight relationship” between the schools and the juvenile court that works to put black students under law enforcement supervision. Black students cited “for very minor infractions end up in front of a juvenile judge,” who then sentences them to probation contingent on compliance with school rules, an official said. That way, “kids who’ve been out of school uniform by wearing the wrong color jacket or shirt” can be sent to juvenile hall for a probation violation. White students allegedly are treated more leniently for similar behavior, officials said.

Meridian officials did not immediately respond to requests for comment from The Wall Street Journal. To date, they have been “cordial and cooperative” with federal investigators, a Justice Department official said.

The department said it was focusing on juvenile justice because the way youths are treated can influence whether they go straight or become habitual offenders. Meridian is the Civil Rights Division’s second-ever investigation into juvenile justice, and others likely will follow, officials said.

“The juvenile justice system should not serve as a stop on the way to the adult prison system,” Mr. Perez said. “This is why the department is committed to investigating Meridian schools for allegations that children are being severely punished for the most minor infractions of school rules. This would be an abuse of the justice system and clearly unconstitutional.”

The 14th Amendment authorizes the federal government to stop states from violating an individual’s constitutional rights. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, which specifically prohibits juvenile justice agencies from violating young people’s constitutional rights, spell out the Justice Department’s enforcement authority, Mr. Perez noted.

Meridian was a flashpoint of the civil rights struggle during the 1960s. In one of the era’s most notorious cases, three civil rights activists based in Meridian, local resident James Chaney and New Yorkers Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, were murdered in 1964 by white supremacists.